

Actionable Steps to Improve Your Taxonomy

By Theresa Putkey



If you're working on a taxonomy that doesn't have the resources (right now) to do a lot of research and engagement with subject matter experts, there are still some actionable steps you can take to improve your taxonomy. When it comes to improving your website's usability, there are two approaches:

- Do a bit of research, then strategize and fix problems
- Make changes based on best practices to see if things improve

These actionable steps can help you pick off changes that are low hanging fruit. As a caveat, these approaches not necessarily going to fix the problem, but they can be an approach in the absence of other resources (such as money or staff).

Approach 1: First Strategize, Then Fix

It's always good to do *at least a bit* of research or background work before you dive in and make changes. Here are some things I typically do as part of a larger project, which can be quite effective:

1. **Develop User Profiles or Proto-Personas:** Make sure that you know what keywords users are after and what their high priority tasks are. Ideally this work is grounded in research, but you can develop draft profiles as a way to make your target user more concrete.
2. **Find the Common Tasks and Content:** You may know from your analytics, from purchases, or popular pages on your site what the major topics and content are. Make sure that these are topics are in the taxonomy.
3. **Shallow and Broad is Better than Deep Deep Deep:** Take a look at your taxonomy to see if there are too many levels in the hierarchy. A deep taxonomy can make it difficult for authors to tag content. It can make displaying filters on the search results page too difficult.
4. **Look at Search Terms for Inspiration:** Use Google's Search Console to see what users are searching for before they arrive on your site. Look at your internal site search terms to see what users are searching for once they're on your site. Make sure that these terms are integrated into your taxonomy in some way, either as preferred terms, synonyms, or keywords.

5. **Look at Other Taxonomies:** What other taxonomies are out there that are related to your subject matter? What are your competitors doing? See if there's any inspiration you can take from what's already available on the internet.

With these steps, you will most likely find things you want to change about your website. Keep your changes relatively simple and pick off low hanging fruit.

Approach 2: Make Changes Based On Best Practices

There are some best practices that can be applied in the absence of a research-driven approach. Please remember that “best practice” doesn't mean foolproof! If you want to know what will make your site easy to use, you need to buck up and do some research.

6. **Get Rid of Jargon and Use Plain Language:** Based on your user personas, who is the target audience and what kinds of words are they expecting to see on your website? Is your taxonomy too full of jargon? Are there plain language words that you can use as substitutes?
7. **Do a Content Audit:** Find out what your website talks about and ensure that every page on your website can be tagged with at least one term. Make sure that your taxonomy actually encompasses the facets your company needs.
8. **Declutter Your Taxonomy:** Remove taxonomy terms that are not used.
9. **Unburden Certain Terms:** Are there terms in your taxonomy that are overused? Can these terms be broken out to be more targeted and to reduce the burden on just one term? For example, a financial institution might have a product for “Banking” with 50 pages tagged to this term. Can “Banking” be broken out to the results for this tag more relevant? We could use “Personal Banking” and “Business Banking” to appeal to different types of clients.

By applying these best practices, you can make your taxonomy more targeted. If things improve, then you've made a good change. If things don't improve, re-evaluate the change you've made.

About Key Pointe and Theresa Putkey

Key Pointe focuses on information architecture, taxonomy, user research and testing. Leveraging over 10 years of experience in information architecture and over 15 years in the technology industry, Theresa brings strong expertise to each customer.